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Contact Us

Latest Census

Bird Census by Year

Home

Search

Meetings &
Programs

Nature Events

Island Art

Kelleys Island

Natural Areas

Island Birding

Photo Tours

Audubon Club

Local Species

L E Water Snake

KI Shipwrecks

What's New

Site Map

Nature News

Other Links

Bird Gallery I

Bird Gallery II

Past Nature Events

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| [LEWS NEWS](#) | [Hibernation on Kelleys Island](#) |

Lake Erie Coastal Wetland Significant Features

The coastal wetlands of Lake Erie support the largest diversity of plant and wildlife species in the Great Lakes. The moderated climate of Lake Erie and its more southern latitude allow for many species not found along the northern Great Lakes. For instance, over 300 species of plants have been identified in the aquatic and wetland habitats of western Lake Erie (Herdendorf, 1992). In the open water of the lake and larger bays, submersed species predominate, including several species important to wildlife, such as wild celery (*Valisneria americana*), and sago pondweed (*Potamogeton pectinatus*) (Herdendorf, 1992). Water lilies such as the white water lily (*Nymphaea odorata*), yellow water lily (*Nuphar advena*) and the American lotus (*Nelumbo lutea*) are not common, but where they do grow they form extensive colonies. Emergent species line the edges of coastal lagoons often in segregated zones, and other species grow in the drier fringes of the marshes.

As a result of this diversity, coastal wetlands of Lake Erie provide habitat for many rare species of flora. Rare wetland communities such as coastal meadow marsh (shoreline fen) occur at several locations including Long Point. At least 37 significant plant species are found in the coastal wetlands of Lake Erie (W. Bakowsky, pers. com.). The rare and endangered Pennsylvania smartweed (*Polygonum pennsylvanicum* var. *eglandulosum*) is endemic to the Erie Islands in western Lake Erie (Herdendorf, 1987). Other examples include horsetail spike-rush (*Eleocharis equisetoides*), grass-leaved arrowhead (*Sagittaria cristata*), American lotus (*Nelumbo lutea*), Emory's sedge (*Carex emoryi*), swamp rose mallow (*Hibiscus moscheutos*) and prairie fringed orchid (*Platanthera leucophaea*).

Wetlands of Lake Erie are important to fish production because they provide spawning and nursery habitat for many wetland dependent species, cover for juvenile and forage fish, and feeding areas for predator fish. Many are important recreational or commercial fish species. Forty-six species of fish have been captured in Lake Erie wetlands and an additional 18 species captured in open water are known to use them during some part of their life (Jude and Pappas, 1992). The most abundant permanent residents of Lake Erie coastal wetlands are white crappie, gizzard shad, black bullhead, white perch, white bass, log perch and freshwater drum. Other species such as white sucker, common carp, emerald shiner, spottail shiner and yellow perch are abundant temporary residents (Jude and Pappas, 1992). Many fish species in these wetlands are rare in the Great Lakes, including spotted gar, striped shiner, quillback, lake chubsucker, golden redhorse, stonecat, brindled madtom, grass pickerel, green sunfish, longear sunfish, orange-spotted sunfish, brook silverside and warmouth (Mandrak and Crossman, 1992; Sutherland, 1994).

Many species of snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders are dependent on Lake Erie wetlands. Twenty-eight species of amphibians and twenty-seven species of reptiles inhabit the Lake Erie region, most of which are found in coastal wetlands for part of their life cycle (Herdendorf, 1992). Four rare amphibians are found in Lake Erie coastal wetlands, including Jefferson's salamander, smallmouth salamander, Fowler's toad, Blanchard's cricket frog (Herdendorf, 1992; D. Sutherland, pers. com.); the last three species are

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restricted in Canada to the shores of Lake Erie. Several species of rare reptiles have also been found including spotted turtle, spiny softshell turtle, queen snake, eastern fox snake, **Lake Erie water snake** and eastern massassauga (D. Sutherland, pers. com.). The **Lake Erie water snake** is confined in Canada to the western shores of the lake, and is predominantly found in coastal wetlands.

Wetlands of Lake Erie support a diversity of bird life. Waterfowl, wading birds, shore birds, gulls and terns, raptors and perching birds use Lake Erie wetlands for migration, nesting and feeding. The wetlands in western Lake Erie from the mouth of the Detroit River to Sandusky Bay, and those at Point Pelee, Rondeau Bay and Long Point have been identified as some of the most important waterfowl habitat complexes in the Great Lakes (Prince *et al.*, 1992). For instance, large numbers of post-breeding dabbling ducks and Canada geese, and thousands of tundra swans stop annually in southwestern Lake Erie coastal wetlands (Prince *et al.*, 1992). As well, Long Point is one of the major staging areas in North America for canvasback and redhead ducks. Wetlands of southwestern Lake Erie and Long Point also provide a major stop over point for sea ducks such as migrating bufflehead, common goldeneye, red-breasted merganser, common mergansers and ruddy duck (Prince *et al.*, 1992).

In terms of other bird species, wetlands adjacent to the large sand spits such as Point Pelee, Rondeau and Long Point attract many migratory many species which cross the lake. Several rare bird species also occur in Lake Erie coastal wetlands. Bald eagles nest near these wetlands, feed in them and also use them during migration. The swampy woodlands associated with the marshes also support rare species such as least bittern, great egret and black-crowned night heron. Other rare birds nesting in Lake Erie wetlands include Wilson's phalarope, king rail, little gull, Forster's tern, black tern, short-eared owl, acadian flycatcher, white-eyed vireo, prothonotary warbler, louisiana waterthrush and yellow-headed blackbird (D. Sutherland, pers. com.).

About 20 species of mammals that utilize Lake Erie marshes (Herdendorf, 1992). Furbearers such as raccoon and mink can be found near the marshes where they feed, and muskrats are common throughout. Deer are common around the upland edges of many of these wetlands.

Source – www.epa.gov

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